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Patchwork Pericardium

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Patchwork Pericardium

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On a train, images pass quickly. Trees are reduced to strokes of green, the landscape peppered with cows and sheep. Houses of families and friends pass in mere milliseconds. Entire towns with birth and death and everything between disappear from view just as quickly as they enter.

I start my day reviewing charts. To my surprise, the 13-day long hauler got discharged yesterday evening. Good for her. The tiny baby with the bowel obstruction had to go to the OR. At least they caught it before it got too bad. The child with that nasty infection finally got the right antibiotics and his white count is trending down. What a relief.

As I peak my head into patient rooms, I see exhausted parents sprawled out on the cots, their child in a bed sleeping peacefully, oblivious to Frozen 2 blaring in the background.

I'm looking forward to rounding because I get to tell the grandmother of my patient, an especially grouchy 2-year-old, that they finally get to go home. As we share the good news, grandma unexpectedly bursts into tears. What was not visible to us as passersby was a complicated social background. The grandma was overwhelmed. She didn't know if she could afford Anna's* medications or how they would get back to the reservation. To complicate things further, Anna's mom was missing and likely using again. She was now filled with worry for both of her babies.

Just like that, the train slowed down and images came into focus. More than just passing through, I was given the smallest glimpse into what families face on the daily. In medicine, we only get glimpses and it's the glimpses that stick with me.

How has your blood pressure been, sir? "It's been high ever since my son beat me up," described an elder at his annual physical. Have you ever been on anti-retroviral therapy? "No, I could never afford it," said the man with his first AIDs defining illness. What questions do you have? "Will she ever grow up?" asked the mom of a daughter with an uncertain but poor genetic prognosis.

These stories stick to my heart. What I'm left with is this patchwork pericardium. It's a tapestry of tragedy; reflections of the world beyond my window. The train of medicine never stops moving. But the borrowed stories help slow it down.